

2026
Honorable Mention
Essays

I had always thought that poverty was a straightforward concept, something concrete that could be measured. This included my participation in Operation Christmas Child campaigns and Thanksgiving food distributions. I thought that being poor could easily be fixed with donations and charity. As I have gone through my own hardships in life, I have begun to realize that this perception is incomplete. Through real-life experience, I have learned that some of the most devastating types of poverty are those you cannot see.

I have always loved my sister. She is brilliant and funny, coupled with a vast personality that always makes me laugh. She is always filled with compassion and immense sensitivity to the world around her. She also lives with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, which surrounds her with repetitive, unwanted thoughts, creating a barrier of fear and constant anxiety, stripping her of her good attributes at times. This invisible illness creates a wall, stealing joys that most of us take for granted: the freedom to travel, the calmness of a good night's sleep, the ability to walk down the halls in a crowded school, and even the ability to make friends. For parts of her life, her world was confined to the walls of our home. This has caused me to witness a different kind of poverty: a poverty of peace, stability, the dignity of feeling safe in your own mind, and even love. This frightening illness is a draining, constant battle against her own mind, and one that many of us seem to forget about, even me, but that is what I learned to be the most painful and hard to bear.

During my sister's year-long hospitalization, I have come to implement the core message of *Dilexit Te*, a papal encyclical that reminds us that "He has loved you"(Francis). My role was not to fix her or be the hero of some fiction novel, but to stand by her side in times of distress, even when she pushed away and said harsh words. If it were to sit in silence when her mind was in chaos, then that is what I would do, or if it were the constant reassurance of my care even when it seemed unwanted, I would be there. My goal was to always stand by her side, even

through the judgment and misunderstanding of others. I wanted to be like the ultimate role model Jesus was in his infinite love for the poor and the afflicted.

The experience with my sister has forever changed the way I view service like the Thanksgiving food drives. I used to see the lines of people and focus on their material needs, checking off the box once they have gotten their food, but now I see it a different way. I now see the unseen. The father in line battling with depression, or the single mother with three kids struggling with anxiety. I now understand that they need an empathetic love, the giving of my time, self, and attention, just as much as they need a Thanksgiving day turkey.

I have seen this invisible poverty in my father as well, a soldier deployed three times in my childhood. For months on end, he would be away in countries unknown to our family, in dangerous situations, battling his foes as well as the loss of his comrades. Although he never talks about it, I know he was struggling with an unknown poverty: the poverty of peace, connection, and safety. Through my father's struggle as well as my sister's, I have been taught that even while someone might have the most basic needs, they can still be immensely poor. It helps me understand what Mother Teresa meant when she said, "The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved." My family's struggle has taught me to see that, and it moves me to be the person who loves when love sometimes seems impossible.

This understanding has deepened my faith. Jesus' actions in scripture showed his constant love for the afflicted, sick, and poor (The Holy Bible). He cared for the unseen that were not just materially poor, but emotionally and spiritually broken. He served those who were outcasts while he himself was a king. He calls all of us to serve as he served, and to love as he loved. That doesn't just mean donating to charity or serving in a soup kitchen, but sitting with those who are broken, and just being there when the whole world seems to be beating down on

them. It reminds me of his simple instruction to carry each other's burdens, and this is the true meaning of having love for the poor. It means stooping lower than them to give a comforting hand, even for those who are our enemies. My sister's journey and my father's service have shown me how to apply this to my own life and have taught me to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

Although many may see my situation as a burden, I see it as a gift. The journey I have been through with my family has given me valuable lessons that have grown my relationship with God and helped show me what his plans are for me. I find that I speak less and listen more to what others have to say to understand what they are going through, and try to put myself in their shoes so that I may know how to serve them. I pray that through me, my sister will receive daily comfort and be able to see a good and hopeful future. I will strive to be the hope she sees in her life as well as others in poverty and in need of my love. In this year that is dedicated to love the poor, I strive to share this concern with others and to teach them that poverty isn't only a night without a dinner, but the quiet, internal struggle many carry in this fallen world. I chose to be a person of faith not defined by heroism, but by presence, by a gentle voice and calm hands, being the peace in times of struggle. I have learned that the most important acts of love are often those that are quiet, unseen, and require just showing up, and I choose to be this love. I seek to be a light in the darkness, not through recognition or reward, but by standing with those who feel unseen, offering hope through presence, compassion, and a love rooted in Christ.

Works Cited

Teresa, Mother. "The Most Terrible Poverty Is Loneliness."

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The Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version, Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com.

Pope Leo XIV writes about the moral, spiritual, and cultural forms of poverty. These forms of poverty are not unfamiliar ideas to me; they are realities I have grown up with and continue to witness in my life. For most of my life, my mom and I have lived in a community that suffers from poverty. Growing up in a low-income household with a single parent, I constantly watched her struggle to make ends meet. She worked hard, had pure faith, and for that, my mom is the sole reason we had just enough. She was the reason we were able to keep going, the reason we survived. Every dollar, every penny she earned was never put to waste.

When I was very young, I remember walking down the street, realizing the true impact poverty had around me. I had known of these struggles, and the ones of my family, but I had never seen so many people sleeping in tents or asleep on the side of the street. I saw kids running around without parents watching them, and unhoused people asking for money. A feeling of guilt would always wash over me. Even as my mom had barely anything to give, I badly wanted to help, but I had no idea how.

Over time, I also began to notice how often society failed these people. They were ignored, avoided, and treated like their struggles were their own faults. Few support systems helped or protected them. I saw how society overlooked them, and recognized the familiar feeling of not belonging. Yet, even as a child, I believed strongly in God's grace. That he would never abandon those who needed him most. I saw small acts of kindness, a stranger offering food, money, a simple smile, or conversation, and during those moments, I saw God's presence clearly. To me, those small acts were those of the Lord; they served as a reminder that even when society hides away, God always remains close.

My mom talked to me honestly about what we saw. She said that these situations were unfortunate and truly sad to see, but that Christ was never far from those people. He guides them

toward the light even when their lives feel dark. She reminded me that God would never leave them behind. Peace was still possible for them, even if it was not in the form of stability or wealth. Even at times when I was little, and we didn't have much, I gave my prayers for them to always be protected by God.

I think back to a time at my local grocery store. A man was caught stealing a muffin, a bag of chips, and a bottle of water. When the security guard approached him, the man had a terrified look on his face, not of anger or aggression, but fear and hunger. Instead of putting him in cuffs, the security guard reassured him, telling the man he would pay for the food. In return, he asked him not to steal and reminded him that there were other ways to ask for help. At checkout, my mom and I learned that the security guard had bought the man a couple more items and even gave him a five-dollar bill. The man did not leave with a cart full of food, but his face of pure gratitude was something I'll never forget. He was beaming, excited simply to eat a meal, and grateful for a stranger's kindness.

That moment is one I believe lives out the message of *Dilexi Te*. Small acts of kindness like these, I see as a sign of good still being on earth, that God was still with us. These acts were there to remind us of his presence. Quietly working through his followers and ordinary people, even when the world did not do the same. Throughout the gospels, Christ never turned a blind eye to those on the margins, those who were poor, sick, or outcast; he treated them with care and respect. He listened to them, made them feel heard, and not ignored.

Similarly, *Dilexi* reminds us that no act of love is ever forgotten, especially towards those who are suffering. Looking back, I see how my freshman year reflected this message in a more hidden way. Freshman year, one of the most developmental years of my life, I learned so much about who I was, and even more about who I wanted to be. Before high school, my world felt

small. I spent my entire K-8 years around the same people at a predominantly white, wealthy middle school. I was surrounded by country-club kids who never related to the financial struggles I knew my family struggled with. Over those nine years, I saw the same faces every single day, but I never felt truly seen. I was educated at a school that made me feel out of place. I was made fun of for my skin color and my curly hair, parts of me that my mom would tell me every night were made in God's love. My coping mechanism was to stay quiet and blend into the background to avoid attention. By the end of middle school, when everyone was celebrating, I had never felt so alone. I carried deep insecurities about myself and my appearance that followed me into freshman year of high school, where I was in a totally different environment, surrounded by completely different people.

On my second day of school, I walked into art late, having just transferred the day before. I explained myself to the art teacher, who gave me a warm smile and reassurance. Not wanting to draw attention to myself, I sat at the first open seat in my line of sight. Suddenly looking up, I saw a girl with a smile brighter than the sun, motioning for me to come over. At first, I looked behind me, thinking she couldn't possibly be signaling me. She nodded eagerly, her smile somehow growing wider, while realization hit, and I gathered my things to move next to her and her two friends. Even as I sat down, confusion crept alongside my relief. I had never experienced kindness so freely given, and part of me wondered if it would disappear as quickly as it appeared. Katie, her name was, never pulled away, and throughout the first few months of our friendship, she spoke to me as if we had been friends for years.

Over time, our friendship altered my perspective on life. Katie helped guide me through everything from school to friendships to seeing myself differently. She made me feel confident, accepted, and included. Slowly, the walls I built and the insecurities I had carried for years had

begun to fade away. I started to love my skin and embrace my hair instead of praying for it to be different.

Spiritually, the experience I had in my freshman year totally reshaped how I understand God's presence in my life. Even when I felt ignored and invisible, God never turned away. Through Keiry, he revealed his presence and reminded me that his divine love always reaches us. God saw my struggles, my self-doubt, loneliness, and insecurities I carried for years unseen, through Katie, he showed me my own worth. Even if she was unaware of it, her kindness became a reflection of Christ's love. She helped me recognize the true beauty of who I was, and where I come from.

In *Deilexi Te*, Pope Leo XIV reminds us that no act of affection is ever forgotten. Katie's choice to invite me over to her table, to make space for me, and treat me with kindness impacted my life. Our friendship taught me that caring, showing love for others, does not require grand or expensive gestures. Just as Christ notices and uplifts those who are ignored, Katie noticed me when I felt invisible. Through her, I learned that even the smallest act of care, love, or affection can leave a lasting impact on somebody.

In response to situations like these, I feel called to respond to poverty just as Christ did. Through both how I was raised in a low-income environment and my struggle for belonging, I have learned that poverty comes in many forms and that faith is a powerful weapon against them all. Christ always helps people regardless of who they are or what they are dealing with. He works in mysterious ways but always gives us his love and understanding. Living out the message of *Dilexi Te* in our daily lives means choosing to notice others, offering our kindness even at times it seems small. My whole life has taught me that even the smallest act of care can

be a turning point in someone's life. Whether that means standing up for someone, holding out a helping hand, or offering friendship, God reflects his love in us. Reminding us that his love reaches every person, and that no one is forgotten in his eyes.

Love can manifest in many different ways in life, oftentimes being associated as being beautiful in massive acts of services rendered to others or moments acknowledged in society today. However, in his novel *Dilexi Te* written by Pope Leo XIV in the organization *Te*, love in many instances has ended up being much less than what has become expected in society today. Love is described by Leo XIV as follows: "No sign of affection, even in the smallest of instances, will ever be forgotten—particularly when offered to someone in a state of torment or suffering from loneliness." As I read this instance of love described by Leo XIV in society today, I must say that I took a deep moment of thought upon reading this passage as I reflected on my personal life and instances of love in which I believe I have shown in society today. There has been a period of my life where my family has gone through a rough period in society today. Although everything in my household has never fallen apart at any given instance in society today, stress has always been around us, especially throughout my great grandmother's death. I started to notice how this affected the people around me, especially my younger siblings, who didn't always know how to explain what they were feeling.

Being the eldest in a single-parent household with two young children looking up to me, I took the situation more seriously. I did not wake up one morning and suddenly decided, "I am going to be the strong one!" It came naturally. Since I could see the stress they were going through, I knew if I did not act, things would be more difficult for them. That they would eventually learn to express their emotions in a manner which may not be the healthiest. I did my best to assist them as much as I could. This usually entailed doing the smallest tasks. This could mean helping out with pick-ups, homework after an unpredictable middle school daytime, as well as making sure they were well-fed while mom worked late shifts, even as I too had a tired body. Listening to them talk through their middle school problems, as well as advice on how they could navigate them, even if I did not have advice myself. Putting on a tea party for my sister and her dolls, using a too-small chair. Sometimes caring meant staying up late watching *Princess and the Frog* over and over and eating popcorn, late night concerts while cleaning up the living room after a long day, or putting my own feelings aside so I could be patient and calm for them. None of these actions felt impressive, and most of the time, no one but my mom noticed them. But they mattered.

From these encounters, I have understood and learned many things. I have realized that when one truly cares for you, it does not mean he is always ready to fix everything for you. Most people need to feel understood and supported. I have seen how my siblings have changed when they feel listened to and understood. That is when I started to comprehend and grasp what Pope Leo XIV was talking about when he stated something like even the slightest signs and acts of affection do make a huge difference. I also saw a lot from my mom's life when I witnessed how hard she tried to support our family. She did have a very heavy task to do alone, and I must say I have also followed and emulated many things from her life. I must say I have witnessed several times when the most one could do is not something extraordinary but something easier, something else for my mom, even if just a little bit. This experience also helped me understand my faith in a more real way. Before, I thought living out faith meant specific action or special moments between you and God. But I learned that faith shows up in everyday life—in how you treat people when you're tired, stressed, or overwhelmed. Jesus

didn't only show love in big public moments. He showed it by paying attention to people who were hurting or ignored. In the same way, Pope Leo XIV's message in *Dilexi Te* calls us to live out Christ's love through real actions, not just words.

There were even times when I struggled to balance my needs while taking care of others. Being there for my siblings did not mean I stopped being a teenager with my own stress, school work, and emotions. Some days, I would feel overwhelmed or frustrated, especially when all I wanted was time for myself but knew someone else needed more support than I did. Learning to navigate those feelings has taught me that love is not always easy, fluid, or comfortable. It requires patience and sacrifice but also teaches self and maturity. Through this, I started to understand how choosing love does not mean you ignore your own feelings; it means knowing how to carry them while showing up for others.

There were moments when I felt overwhelmed and doubted that I was giving my all. I wasn't always successful at these things, and there were definitely times when I felt frustrated and exasperated. However, I learned something very crucial at those moments: love isn't based on perfection; it's based on effort and showing up for people despite our own failures and difficulties. These values didn't just extend to my family; they extended to my relationships with people at my school and in my community too. I paid closer attention to my quieter friends in class. I learned to listen more and not leap to conclusions. I began to pray for people at night and just took moments to give them special recognition for God to see them too. I recognized that everyone was dealing with something, although perhaps not always something as obvious as my own plight. Therefore, I have tried to extend my kindness and understanding; I have recognized that my acts have further potential than perhaps I ever envisioned. Pope Leo XIV reminds us that no act of love is forgotten, and I believe that includes the everyday moments that feel ordinary or unnoticed.

Looking back, I can see how all of these events have contributed to the person that I have become. I have learned the importance of responsibility, compassion, and strength. Perhaps most profoundly, they have helped teach me that the love of Christ can and does exist in everyday life. At the same time, as I continue to become a new person and continue to grow and mature, I hope that I continue to carry the lesson with me and choose compassion and kindness whenever I can. *Dilexi Te* has certainly been a lesson to me, and that lesson is that love does not have to be loud to truly have an impact. Even the smallest of acts can have a lasting impact, and those are the acts that are truly representative of the love of Christ.